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Chernyshevsky's Ethics and Aesthetics (1928)

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This lecture was originally published in Lunacharsky's *On Literature and Art*, under the title “Chernyshevsky's Ethics and Aesthetics: A Contemporary Evaluation.”

The lecture has been divided into titled sections for the sake of ease of navigation. A figure was also added to illustrate a work of art described by Lunacharsky.

There are a lot of names mentioned in this lecture, so some readers may find it disorienting. For a brief summary of Chernyshevsky — the subject of the lecture — see “Why Read Chernyshevsky?”. [1] Lunacharsky was the Minister of Education of the Soviet Union, a well-respected thinker, playwright, and man of letters. Plekhanov was one of the first people in Russia to identify himself as a Marxist, and generally a respected intellectual, but the Bolsheviks faulted him for his schematism, in association with his taking the moderate Menshevik as opposed to the revolutionary Bolshevik side of the party split. Krupskaya was Lenin's wife (as well as a veteran revolutionary in her own right), and Lenin was the leader of the revolution.

— R. D.

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An Anti-Aesthetic Monster

The connection between Chernyshevsky's aesthetical and ethical doctrine and his personality is usually traced by both his friends and his foes; but this is done incorrectly, I think, because generally Chernyshevsky's portrait is not painted with sufficient clarity. From his correspondence, memoirs, diary and all the abundant material we have at our disposal, it is perhaps not difficult to extract his characteristics as a person; but, as yet, such material has been used extremely meagrely.

The prevailing image of Chernyshevsky is one of a man with unusually firm convictions, an exceedingly strong intellect, a wide education, a courageous nature and an extremely serious personality; one of the outstanding men of his time certainly, but all the same a man with a prosaic frame of mind, a nihilist, "a bilious man," as Herzen called him. The expression which Turgenev used of him when talking to him: "You, Nikolai Gavrilovich, are simply a snake, whereas Dobrolyubov is a cobra," shows that even Turgenev considered him a very wise, wily and cunning person. Be that as it may, for anyone with a second-hand or even superficial knowledge of Chernyshevsky, he appears as a somewhat dry person, to whom any idealism is quite alien.

We very often used to confuse theoretical and philosophical idealism with practical idealism; perhaps we still do. The well-known poet Tretyakov, for example, proclaimed only recently that it was necessary to declare war on pathos and to place one's stake on "the practical"; and we are indeed frequently inclined to consider Chernyshevsky a practical person, a man without pathos, a man who reacted to the aesthetic as ironically as Bazarov reacted to pretty phrases — in short, an essentially practical, rational nature.

It is from this that people conclude his lack of talent as a writer of fiction. They say that *What Is To Be Done?* is without doubt a great work of its kind, which caused a tremendous stir and was, for its time, a lodestar for many; but if judged from a strictly artistic viewpoint, it lacks a certain fantasy and lyricism — precisely those elements which would be lacking in someone

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person. It seems that he should have been given the same advice which Apollo gave to Socrates, a person with an overintellectual and rational nature, not long before his death: Apollo advised Socrates to take up music. This softening, harmonising music with its blend of intuition and romanticism was evidently completely missing in Chernyshevsky. Those people who set their sights on “the practical” without doubt revel in this “realism” of Chernyshevsky, and must be extremely impressed by such a dry image of him.

It may be considered that this dryness of heart, this overwhelming “intellectuality” prompted Chernyshevsky to the thought that in fact only egoism existed; that a person had only a rational choice, from an egoistic viewpoint, as to how he should behave; and that there was not, and could not be, any form of ethics other than the ethics of rational egoism. Dry and rationalistic. Those unknown quantities, the unconscious — everything slips away, unnoticed by Chernyshevsky. It is easy to come to the conclusion that the author of such a theory, Chernyshevsky, was himself too rationalistic a person, someone who possessed an exclusively intellectual nature.

What is the main idea of Chernyshevsky's treatise *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality*? [2] It is a refutation of aesthetics as such which goes so far that even Pisarev felt that Chernyshevsky, by treating such subtle phenomena as art and aesthetics so roughly, had managed to stifle them for the good of everyone, in Pisarev's opinion. It is true that Plekhanov set out to show that nothing of the sort had happened, that Chernyshevsky's treatise was a serious and exhaustive scientific work. But the very posing of the question — the suspicion that art is somehow impractical, the attempts to prove that reality as such is far higher than any dream or any kind of artistic creation — all this, of course, forced the liberals surrounding Chernyshevsky to look on him as an anti-aesthetic monster, an extremely practical and dry type of person.

It is Plekhanov who has painted the most brilliant picture of Chernyshevsky, of all the facets of his unusually rich personality. Volumes five and six of Plekhanov's works are the most brilliant volumes dedicated to Chernyshevsky. But Plekhanov's main thesis — I would even say his basic line of approach in his interpretation of Chernyshevsky — is akin to portraying Chernyshevsky as a dry person, a nihilist, a Bazarov.

~~Chernyshevsky, the educator, the enlightener of the eighteenth-century type — this is~~

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is well known, intellectuals *par excellence*, people for whom the rational approach remained supreme, people who were quite unable to appreciate the instinctive and the subconscious; instead of approaching phenomena from a historical, or, as Marx said, a dialectical viewpoint, they put their questions from a logical, common-sense position, from the demands of the intellect.

On what does Plekhanov base such accusations against Chernyshevsky? Mainly, of course (and here Plekhanov is absolutely right), he bases them on Chernyshevsky's world outlook, on the basic features of his philosophy, above all his social philosophy. Plekhanov indeed establishes that Chernyshevsky was a staunch and unswerving materialist, a follower of Feuerbach, and that, like many such men, he ceased to be a materialist as soon as he set about solving social problems. His image of the world and of man was a materialistic one; only matter with its characteristics and evolution was, as it were, recognised by him. And yet, as Plekhanov said, he considered that the world was controlled by opinions. That is, once you have understood the laws that govern Nature and man, you can impose your rational will into this world. This was also the approach of the outstanding figures of the French Revolution; once you have understood that Nature is the natural aggregate of force and matter, then you should not only become properly acquainted with it, but also bring the existing order of things before the court of reason, rejecting everything which reason finds worthless trash, and keeping everything which it finds advantageous for the people. The whole problem lies in cognition, judgement and the realisation of a rational plan. Such a concept of the way society develops and the consequential means for its transformation to be found in the realisation of a rationally established plan, whose strength is its convincingness, its rationality — this of course is an idealistic approach.

The pre-Marxist materialists, therefore, lapse into idealism when they attempt to tackle social problems. Since they approach sociological, historical, economic and political problems from this idealistic standpoint, they are rationalists and enlighteners, people who consider that ideas are the driving force behind the process of historical development. It is from this that the exaggerated idea about the significance of the ideologists inevitably arises.

A clever, educated and critical man is the bearer of an idea. An idea is a force which transforms the world. It follows then that it is precisely this rational person who transforms

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In his definition of Chernyshevsky as an enlightener, Plekhanov does not himself say that he is an intellectualist. He does not completely side with those people who paint the portrait of a dry person, whose life is governed entirely by his brain and his convictions (many of these people, I may add, respect Chernyshevsky). But since the accusation that Chernyshevsky overrated the importance of ideas and exaggerated the importance of intellectualists and their intellects was supported, before and after Plekhanov, by criticism along the lines of this narrow image of Chernyshevsky, it can be said that Plekhanov helped to establish such a portrayal.

A Man of the Heart

I want to restore the image of the real Chernyshevsky as an overwhelmingly emotional person with a sensual nature: one might call him a man of the heart. He was a man of great passions and great real life, fervently in love with life and with the real events of a personal, even an intimate existence. It is precisely this image of Chernyshevsky which I want to recreate, since in fact his ethics and aesthetics spring neither from his intellectuality nor from his one-sidedness, but from his powerful impassioned feelings and his many-sidedness, from his realism which can only be interpreted as a love of life, as a manifestation of Chernyshevsky's colossal vital strength. If I can succeed in recreating these qualities, then Chernyshevsky's portrait will look very different, and he will, perhaps, have to be evaluated anew.

The first volume of Chernyshevsky's literary heritage was published recently. His diary, which covers his years as a young man, is one of the main sections of this volume. The best section of this wonderful diary, which is capable of inspiring all those who read it with a tremendous love for the man, is the last part which Chernyshevsky himself calls: "The Diary of My Relations with the Girl Who Is Now My Happiness." All the conversations which he had with his bride are noted down here with extraordinary detail. When we read through the following two pages from his diary, we are listening to Chernyshevsky himself at an important moment of his life, and we are at once able to appreciate the pace at which he lived and the music which was inherent in him as an individual. It is all very remote from the portrait the liberal landowners painted of him; a portrait which they were able to spread unhindered, by taking advantage of his modesty and his dislike of drawing attention to himself, a portrait which was to be repeated later by Volynsky and other idealists, at a time

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when people were beginning to find fault with Chernyshevsky and to be disillusioned with him.

The method used is very interesting; it is interesting to see the excitement and the precision with which this 26-year-old high-school teacher, preparing himself for revolutionary and literary activity, notes down his conversations with his wife-to-be.

After tea, we sat down — she by the window, and I at the other side of the table — the long side, so there was a corner of the table between us. It was 5:30. I glanced at her for a moment or two, and she didn't take her eyes off me.

"I haven't the right to say what I am about to say, but I'll say it all the same, even though you may laugh at me: you want to get married because relations at home are strained."

"Yes, it's true. When I was young, I was happy and didn't want anything; but now when I can see how I am looked upon at home, my life has become miserable. And if I am gay, the gaiety is forced rather than genuine."

"It is quite impossible for me to answer you as I should." (I continue at 11 p.m. Tomorrow I must go to Stephany to have my chest examined.)

"Tell me, have you any suitors?"

"Yes, two."

"But are they bad people? What about Lindgren?" (I pronounced the name in such a way as if to say: Of these two you certainly wouldn't consider him.)

"No." (In a tone which said: How could I?)

"What about Yakovlev? He's not a bad chap, is he?"

"It's for that reason that I cannot marry him. He's an old acquaintance of Papa's. On our way to Kiev we went to Kharkov" (to see an uncle or some other relation — I can't remember whom she mentioned). "There one of the landlords —

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that I couldn't do anything without Papa's consent, and that even with his consent I still wouldn't marry him. How can one take a decision that will ruin one's youth?"

"Listen to what I have to say in all sincerity. I cannot live here, in Saratov, because I shall never earn as much money as I require. There is no future for me here. I shall have to go to St. Petersburg. But that's not the half of it. I cannot marry here, because I shall never be able to achieve independence and set up a home and family, as I would like to. My mother, it is true, loves me very much and she will love my wife even more."

(Continued 21st February, 7 a.m., before I set off to Stephany.)

"As things are at home, I certainly couldn't settle down there. For this reason I'm a stranger at home; I remain outside all family affairs, and all I do there is joke with Mama. I don't even really know what is going on at home. I must therefore go to St. Petersburg. When I'm there I shall have to be extremely busy and work hard to get properly settled. On my arrival there I shall have *nothing*: how can I possibly arrive married? It would be mean and despicable of me to join my life with someone else's, especially since I am not sure how long life and freedom will be granted to me. My way of thinking is such that I can expect the police to come any day to take me away to St. Petersburg and put me in prison, God knows for how long. I'm saying things in class, and doing things here that can end in penal servitude."

"Yes, so I've heard."

"And I can't change my way of thinking; perhaps I'll cool down in time, but I doubt it."

"Why? Do you really think you can't change?"

"I cannot change my way of thinking because it is part of my nature, which has become embittered and dissatisfied with everything around me. Now I don't know whether I'll ever cool down in this respect. Up till now, anyway, this tendency has only been increasing, becoming more and more acute and playing a greater and

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devout monk awaits the Day of Judgement. Apart from this, there is going to be an uprising shortly, in which I shall certainly take part.”

This seemed such a strange and improbable idea to her that she very nearly burst out laughing.

“What do you mean? How?”

“Have you given this any thought at all?”

“No.”

“It is inevitable. The people’s dissatisfaction with the government, taxes, bureaucrats and landowners is increasing. Only one spark is needed to set the whole thing alight. The number of people from educated circles who are against the present order of things is also increasing; the spark which will start the fire is also ready. Just one thing is uncertain — when will it start? Within ten years, perhaps, but I think it will be earlier. And if it starts, I shan’t be able to hold myself back, despite my cowardice. I shall take part in it.”

“And Kostomarov, too?”

“I don’t think so — he is too noble-minded and poetic a character; bloodshed and filth will frighten him off. I am not afraid of filth, or of drunken peasants wielding bludgeons, or of bloodshed.”

“Neither am I!” (My God, if only she realised the significance of what she is saying!)

“But what will be the result of all this? Penal servitude or the gallows. So you see how impossible it is for me to link anyone else’s life with my own.” (From her expression it could be seen that she was finding such talk boring.) “You see — you are already bored by all these discussions — but they will go on for years because there is nothing else I can talk about. It is enough that Mama’s fate is linked with mine — and she will never survive such happenings. And what will happen to the

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“Yes.”

“He was a very rich person who married for love the girl with whom he was brought up. After some time, the police came and took him away and he spent a year in prison. His wife was pregnant (please excuse such details), and because she was so frightened, she gave birth to a son who was deaf and dumb. Her health was permanently shattered. Finally he was released and allowed to leave Russia. The excuse for this was that his wife was ill (in fact she did need to take the waters) and that his son needed treatment. He settled somewhere in the Sardinian Empire. Suddenly, Louis-Napoleon, now the Emperor Napoleon, wishing to render Nicholas I a service, seized him and sent him back to Russia. His wife, who was living somewhere in Ostend or Dieppe, heard about this and fell down dead. This is what happens to girls who marry such people. I am not saying that I am equal to Iskander — in intellect, for example — but my way of thinking is just as uncompromising as his and I must expect a similar fate.” [3]

This is the young Chernyshevsky's self-portrait. He yearns to marry her, as he writes elsewhere: “If I let this opportunity slip, I shall have no personal life, no personal happiness, and yet it is for a personal life and a family that I have been created...,” and so on. Despite this passionate desire for personal happiness, he is able to say: I am afraid neither of blood nor of prison, and I cannot possibly withdraw from the revolution.

This is already most unlike the image of him as a dry person which we are often given.

His inner strength is without doubt the vital source of his aesthetical ideas. In his long essay on aesthetics he defines his approach to the subject in this way:

What is in fact beauty? [...] The feeling which beauty evokes in us is a radiant joy, such as we feel in the presence of someone who is dear to us. We love beauty selflessly; we delight in it and it fills us with joy, just as a loved one does. Hence beauty possesses something which is all-embracing, something capable of incorporating the most varied forms, something of an exceedingly general nature, for beauty appears to us in extremely varied objects, in things which are quite unlike one another.

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The phenomenon which is dearest to man in general is life: above all, man loves the life he would most like to lead; after this he loves just any kind of life because it is better to live than not to live. By its very nature, everything alive is terrified at the thought of death, of non-existence, and therefore loves life. And it seems that the definition: “Beauty is life” — that is, “the person in whom we can see life as it should be, as we understand it, is beautiful; the object in which life is manifested, or which reminds us of life is beautiful” — this definition, it seems, can explain satisfactorily all those occasions when the emotion of beauty is evoked in us. [4]

As you can see these are indeed poetical lines. Notice from where he draws his analogies — from the sphere of the life of the heart, of love and sex, but in the loftiest possible meaning of the word. In order to say that life is more precious to him than anything; that above all he wants this life to develop harmoniously and reach its full maturity; that where life is developing harmoniously, there both beauty and radiant joy are to be found — to express all this he says: It is just like meeting a loved one. Such passages completely change the usual picture of Chernyshevsky as an ascetic *raznochinets*. [5] What strikes us in Chernyshevsky is an insatiable thirst for life, an acceptance of the most real and genuine life.

Chernyshevsky's letters to Nekrasov have recently been published. There is one page in this correspondence which is indeed remarkable. Even I, who love Chernyshevsky and who have studied him since my youth, found it unexpected.

Nekrasov wrote a self-pitying letter to Chernyshevsky. We do not know its contents, but it is clear from the reply that he had grown tired of life, that everything bored him and that he was wondering whether death was not in fact better. These are the lyrical lines which Chernyshevsky wrote in reply:

Please do not think that in my evaluation I am being carried away by your tendency — a good tendency cannot make up for a weak talent. I know this as well as anyone — besides I am by no means an out and out supporter of this tendency; I only seem one because I am a person of extreme opinions, which I sometimes have to defend to people without any opinions whatever. But I myself know from experience that convictions are not everything in life; the heart has its needs, too, and the life of the heart means for each of us real grief or real joy. This, too, I know

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grief or joy that convictions can occupy our minds. I would even say that, for me, my own affairs are more important than problems of world importance; people do not shoot themselves, or drown themselves, or become drunkards because of world problems. This has been my own experience, and I know that the poetry of the heart has its rights just as the poetry of the mind, and I find the first more attractive than the second. This explains, for example, why I am more impressed by your plays that are free from any tendency than by your plays with a tendency. *When from the confusing gloom..., Long since spurned by you..., I was at your graveside..., Oh fatal, futile passion...,* and so forth, positively make me weep — something which no tendency can do. If I have been frank about myself, it is to let you know that I (personally) by no means regard poetry merely from a political standpoint. On the contrary, politics forces its way into my heart — a heart which does not live by politics at all, or at least which has no desire to live by politics. [6]

What does this mean? Is it perhaps retraction on Chernyshevsky's part? Have we perhaps touched on the weak point of his heart? Have we perhaps been taking him for a heroic revolutionary, whereas all the time in fact he wanted to leave politics entirely alone? No, Chernyshevsky's evaluation here is, in fact, a correct and rational one.

What was the essence of Chernyshevsky's politics, to which his whole life was devoted? It was the abolition of serfdom, autocracy, the bourgeois system, and so on. Why did he desire the abolition of these things so passionately? Because it would enable people to live the real life of the heart, to live a cultured existence with its wealth of experiences. The aim of political struggle is the establishment of a happy human existence. Without such an aim, what would be the point of politics? It is necessity which makes us occupy ourselves with politics. If each one of us thought only of his own personal welfare and thereby diminished the energy which each put into the general struggle, we would be defeated. But this does not mean that a genuine revolutionary is one who is passionately enamoured of politics — as a chess player or card player is passionately attached to his game — and must consider it the aim of the whole world. Of course not. A revolutionary's political activity is expedient, and serves to lead mankind out of the colossal ocean of evil towards happiness, prosperity and a rational existence. Therefore Chernyshevsky had the right to say what we have learned from this letter, which shows what a passionate thirst for happiness he had and what a rich and healthy

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personality he possessed. It becomes clear that his rules of conduct stemmed precisely from this vital force.

Chernyshevsky writes, incidentally: “I know from my own experience that one can sometimes become a drunkard as a result of life’s calamities.” Did something of this sort in fact happen to him? Yes, it did, and it is to be found in these very letters to Nekrasov. It is quite remarkable to see such a tender trait in such a strong character. This is what he writes in another letter:

Lessing and I have not enough time to compile *Foreign News* — that is, there would be enough time, if only I were calm, but if only you knew what I have lived through these last six weeks, you would be amazed that I can write anything at all just now. I shall merely say this: The longer I live, the more I grow convinced that, although people are full of irrationalities and stupidities, there is nonetheless more good in them than evil. To allay your fears I will tell you that these unpleasantnesses did not arise out of literature, and concern no one but myself. I have become more than ever convinced that all present institutions are stupid and harmful, however wonderful they might appear: love, friendship, enmity — if this is not complete nonsense, then it leads to complete nonsense. Yet man is, all the same, a good and noble creature; it is impossible not to respect and love people, or many people anyway. [7]

What kind of experiences were these, from which he formed the impression that everything was stupid and absurd, but which in the end strengthened still further his belief in man? Here are some extremely intimate lines which again show Chernyshevsky in an unusually tender light:

You will perhaps remember that I love my wife and that the birth of her first child was accompanied by many complications, including loss of milk, etc. The doctors said that this could happen again if she gave birth to a second child, and would perhaps result in death. So I decided to be content with just one offspring, but it turned out that, for our sins and against my will, another child was on the way. You can imagine how I was racked with doubt about whether this stupid business would have a happy ending. September was the last month in which I managed to retain

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confused my thoughts. Four months passed like this; I wrote what I could, but it was very little — and for weeks on end I could not put two words together; I became drunk twice, something that I am not in the habit of doing at all. Only in the last few days when everything has turned out well, and my wife is already starting to walk, have I become like a person again. But before that both my mind and soul were in a ghastly state. It is good that this stupid affair is over. [8]

Here is your “egoist,” your “prosaic person”; his passionate nature drives him into the arms of his young and beautiful wife. He knows that their intimacy can kill her, and when it appears that perhaps he has killed her, he goes completely out of his mind; he loses his grip on everything; and the thought that he himself has killed this person so dear to him, has sacrificed her to his own passion, takes prevalence over all else. But when he recovers from this shock, he is reminded of many words which were said here, many heartfelt emotions; and he says: “What a wonderful being man is!”

I should like to show you, too, his personal attitude to poetry. We shall see later, when I am analysing his aesthetical views, that, to Plekhanov, Chernyshevsky’s attitude to poetry is an intellectual one, that he judges it according to the degree of moralising which it contains. But we have already seen that this is not so; we have seen that he reacted warmly to lyrical works depicting human emotions. (This does not mean, on the other hand, that he passed by, let us say, Nekrasov’s lyrics, inasmuch as they were of a social nature, with indifference; on the contrary, such lyrics moved him tremendously.) This is how Chernyshevsky, cornered like some wild beast, his reason fading from complete inactivity, wrote to Pypin from the icy wastes of Siberia, when he heard that Nekrasov was dying:

If, when you get my letter, Nekrasov is still breathing, tell him that I love him warmly as a person, that I thank him for his kind attitude towards me, and that I embrace him; tell him that I am convinced his fame will never die, that Russia’s love for him, the most noble and the greatest genius of all her poets, will be everlasting. I am weeping for him... [9]

Nekrasov was still breathing, and Chernyshevsky’s words, read out by Pypin, brought him great joy and deeply stirred him.

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Here is Krasnov, Chernyshevsky's secretary, telling how Chernyshevsky used to read Nekrasov in Siberia:

Nikolai Gavrilovich asked me to listen to *A Knight for an Hour*. His slightly drawn-out, rhythmical manner of reading, with its logical stresses, made a tremendous impression on me; completely absorbed, I did not notice Nikolai Gavrilovich's voice becoming more and more resonant. "The ascent to the belfry" he read as if he himself were living through it. In a hoarse, broken voice he began to read the last verse, the poet's self-adjuration when thinking of his mother. Suddenly Nikolai Gavrilovich could contain himself no longer, and burst out sobbing, continuing to read the poem. I had not the heart to stop him, for I was also deeply moved. Olga Sokratovna interrupted this scene so charged with emotion, saying:

"It is harmful for you."

"All right, dear, all right," and a short while later we set to work.

It appears that poetry inspired in Chernyshevsky anything but the "cold observations of the mind," or calculations based purely on the amount of new knowledge contained in the work. Nikolai Gavrilovich was the most gentle and responsive of readers, in whose rich and noble soul the call of poetry resounded with immense fervour. That is why it is difficult to believe that he stuffed his aesthetics, his theory of art, with that dry intellectualism, of which not only the idealists, like Volynsky, but also, to a significant degree, Plekhanov accuse him. We shall speak about these accusations in more detail later on.

You know that Chernyshevsky was extremely well disposed towards Dobrolyubov, and that the two were very fond of each other. To conclude this part of my lecture, I shall quote two more extracts. The first — from Cheshikhin-Vetrinsky's book — describes the way in which people reacted to Chernyshevsky. The second is what Chernyshevsky said about Dobrolyubov, which one can apply fully to Chernyshevsky himself and which we, the friends and admirers of Chernyshevsky, can use to reply to anyone, who dares yet again to accuse him of heartless prosaicism, nihilism, egoism, etc.

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Two basic features run through Chernyshevsky's early years and afterwards throughout his life; the student's attention is involuntarily arrested by these two characteristics.

First, he has by nature an unusually gentle and compassionate heart which captivates all that surrounds him.

In his childhood he was an "angel in the flesh"; as an adolescent, he was surrounded by the adoration of children whom he would win with his games. His fellow students simply worshipped him, not only because of the outstanding quality of his student genius, but also because of the charm of his character and gentle nature. As a young man, he was seen as someone "who was made, above all else, to be trusted, someone to whom one could confide anything." Young people attached themselves to him "like dogs", as one of them confessed; and his high-school pupils will remember their teacher with tears in their eyes for the rest of their lives. The young man Lobodovsky and, many years later, the poet Nekrasov, disillusioned and suffering bitter grief, compared him with Christ. [10]

This was, in those days, the highest possible praise.

Those who met him in later years will also remember him with adoration — long after his death, one of them will say, remembering their forced separation: The wound has not yet healed. [11]

"He who has known him will never forget; he will suffer a torment of grief," — one of his friends in exile (Shaganov) quoted these lines of Nekrasov about him. But more remarkable is the way he could charm simple people — an ability which must have developed in him in his early years, for, generally speaking, it is only rarely that the ability for sociable intimacy grows with the years. A striking story is told by Mr. Nikolayev, who witnessed the quietening effect of Chernyshevsky's words on an angry and excited mob of Poles, uneducated and extremely reactionary men, who had ganged up in a prison against the socialists, their fellow inmates. He saw them "weep" as "Pan Chernyshevsky" came to the end of his simple, but heartfelt speech. [12]

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This can be added to what I have already said; it fully characterises this person who was quite exceptional in the direct appeal of his nature. This charm originated in his powerful vital force and the extraordinary sympathy which he extended to everything — except, of course, that which was evil and hindered life's development.

Chernyshevsky ended his first article on the death of Dobrolyubov with the following words:

You have called our friend a soulless and heartless man, dear sirs. I now have the honour of addressing you in my own name and the name of everyone who reads these pages, yourselves included, and you will repeat to yourselves what I am about to tell you — I now have the honour of calling you dull-witted simpletons. I challenge you to appear, you worthless dullards, to support your former opinions, I challenge you... You are afraid! I can see you retreating. [13]

We could repeat the same words to every liberal, aesthete or idealist who says: “Ah yes, Chernyshevsky — the *raznochinets*, the first seminarist democrat, of whom Tolstoy wrote, ‘he smells of bedbugs’; surely this man is completely devoid of any poetry, an impossibly dry pedant in whom there is nothing that speaks to the heart, a kind of Bazarov in a clumsily made seminarist's frock.”

Chernyshevsky's Materialism

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Chernyshevsky's materialism also proceeds from his unusually passionate and strong nature. We live now in a different atmosphere; many concepts have completely changed, but not long ago the general idea of the materialist and the idealist was exactly the same as the one portrayed in a picture by Makovsky called *The Materialist and the Idealist*, which is in the Tretyakov Art Gallery. The materialist is portrayed as a fat cook with an unusually large belly (so that it is immediately obvious that this is a materialist — he lives for his belly); he has a thick neck and is short-sighted, with spectacles on his nose (an allegory of course); his expression is one of sceptical self-sufficiency. He is listening irritably and with obvious disapproval to what the foppish-looking idealist has to say to him. The latter is a slim man who could fly through the air with the ease of a feather; his clothes are ragged and worn, his neck is such that one could strangle him with only two fingers; his hair is in disarray (mental preoccupation prevents him from combing it); he has a far-away look in his eyes and the diffused pink glow of dreams on his face. Maybe an idealist so depicted is not to your liking, but at least he is better than that overweight cook. This view that the materialist is a rather stupid man whose horizons are more or less limited, who values only the material, and that

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intangible images and wondrous music — this view is repeated again and again and has come to have a certain force in the conflict of the two philosophies. In fact, the idealist is a shallow person, and his *Weltanschauung* is idealistic and shallow — nebulous even.

The idealist does not like reality and cannot come to terms with it.

There are times, it is true, when reality is detestable, when it becomes a kind of stone face which looks through pitiless eyes. To come to terms with such a reality is to come to terms with the meanness of life.

Militant materialists, on the other hand, accept and love reality, and look upon it as the raw material for their struggles and creative activity. The idealist cannot see this creative factor — and this arises not simply from the shallowness of his nature, not because Ivan Ivanovich has a stronger character and is able as a result to become a materialist, whereas Pyotr Petrovich has a weak stomach and flabby muscles, and consequently trembles at the sight of reality. No, the reason for this lies much deeper: classes, groups and individuals who find themselves outcasts from life, who are unable to come to terms with life because they have received nothing from it but unpleasantness — even though outwardly they have attained the highest rung of the social ladder, their nerves and stomach are in shreds, and they are completely cut off from life, quite incapable of enjoying it — these classes, groups and individuals cast themselves off from the shores of reality for the realm of the imaginary, a shallow and nebulous dream world which begins, for them, to take the place of life. This they may well find wonderful. We give them up for dead — what are they to us? Let them poison themselves however they like. And yet they are creating a philosophy, a pseudo-science and a form of art which is generally a negation of life.

Our contemporary, Eichenbaum, the scholar of literature and the fine arts, for example, said these remarkable words:

What makes you think that art is linked with life? Perhaps it is linked rather with death.

Eichenbaum thinks that death has a greater poetic quality than life, because he is evidently a shallow person, lacking stability and firm principles; it is because of this that he likes

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Chernyshevsky understood that formalism asserts that only form has value in art, that art is illusory and is to be valued precisely for its illusory nature.

But Chernyshevsky himself was not like this. It can be said that a materialist, such as Chernyshevsky, is someone who is passionately, with every cell and fibre of his being, in love with Nature, with reality, with life. Yet this does not mean that he accepted life unconditionally. On the contrary, it was because he loved life and its development, loved all that was positive in life, that he saw that life in Nature, and particularly in society, was set in abnormal conditions. It was in the name of his love for life that his hatred for anything retarding its growth increased, and he accepted a struggle and all the suffering that went with it, because he could glimpse victory ahead. Victory was the transformation of reality itself, purging it of every impurity, of everything that was absurd, monstrous, laughable or vice-ridden.

As has already been pointed out, Chernyshevsky was constantly drawing an analogy between love for life and sexual love; but this does not mean that he was something in the nature of a Freudian. The meaning of the analogy is as follows: the love of a person for the body of another person, the desire for possession and for fruition — all these feelings are linked in a fundamental way with the very richness of life, with its real strength; it is this joy of life, so characteristic of the representatives of the new, rising classes, which leads to that courageous philosophy of the victorious fighter, based on the idea of labour, which forms a materialist. And I repeat: we consider it *a priori* incorrect — and this I shall try to prove — that there was no radiant quality in Chernyshevsky's *Weltanschauung*, that it contained nothing that might be called beauty or poetry. As we come closer to Chernyshevsky, we shall realise that his was a life that reached its full flowering, that Chernyshevsky was one of the most wonderfully versatile and mature people who has ever lived. And his whole outlook, and indeed his whole life, is stamped with the imprint of strength, beauty and poetry.

We know that Chernyshevsky was a *raznochinets*, a seminarist, the son of a priest. Why was it that the landowners of the time, people of the manor-house type of culture (including the more liberal landowners like Turgenev), were inclined towards dreams and day-dreaming, and why did reality appear so coarse to them? It was, of course, because they were quite divorced from hard work, from the struggle for existence. The landowner in his manor house

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grasping reality. His whole outlook would betray the artificial refinement which arose from the kind of life he led. What in fact was the landowners' political struggle, starting, let us say, with Pushkin's rebelliousness in his early life? It was a kind of struggle amongst themselves. The revolutionary Decembrist would fall on Nicholas's shoulder and say: My father, my tsar, and so on. It was an argument amongst themselves, a completely artificial argument, and the struggle would be veiled behind the high ideal of serving some cause or another. It is true that some of them ended up on the gallows, and were in fact guided by the desire to extend in a certain way the rights of the leading ranks of the bourgeoisie, but it was not the kind of bloody direct conflict which inevitably, and not by accident, leads to revolution, a conflict which arises because it is impossible to live side by side with autocracy — not because one's conscience does not allow it, this is of secondary importance, but because one is impelled to it by the problems of one's very existence.

A raznochinets is quite another matter. Because of his very position in life, a *raznochinets* could not fail to become a revolutionary, unless he entirely lacked a mature political programme and sank into the common mire. Although Chernyshevsky came from a priest's family, he was forced to work from childhood onwards. Life was hard for him at both the seminary and at home. As he himself relates: "We had enough to eat it is true, but there was never any money, and when a new pair of boots was needed, obtaining the money was always a long and involved business."

Chernyshevsky, you may remember, did not approach the question of marriage like a landowner, who always had more than enough of everything and could marry ten wives if he so desired. Chernyshevsky had to consider whether or not he was performing an ignoble action in presuming to make his beloved his own, when perhaps she would starve to death as his wife. This stark approach was inevitably conditioned by cruel reality, by life itself. To a landowner this would, of course, appear unpoetic.

Let me read you an interesting conversation between Turgenev and Nekrasov, which illustrates this class angle very clearly:

One day, dining with Nekrasov, Turgenev said:

"By the way the *Sovremennik* [14] will soon become exclusively a seminarist

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“Does it matter who writes the articles — just as long as they have their effect!”

Nekrasov objected.

“I can assure you, gentlemen, that I can tell a seminarist even in the bath-house now,” said one of the men of letters who was present; “you can sense the smell of cheap olive oil and smoke-black in the presence of a seminarist; the lamps begin to glow dully because of the lack of oxygen, and it becomes difficult to breathe.”

“Where have the seminarists sprung from?” Turgenev’s friend Annenkov asked.

“How is it that they have invaded literature?”

“It’s because times have changed,” answered Nekrasov. “The public is now demanding the discussion of social problems, which is something we cannot give it. In other respects, too, it must be confessed, there is a tremendous gulf between them and us. The strictest of moral judges would find nothing reprehensible in their private lives, but in ours they would find so much filth. In their moral principles they are as hard as steel, whereas we are shattered people.” [15]

What must Chernyshevsky, a great person and seminarist, a typical representative of the first wave of the democratic movement close to the people, what did he have to say when he approached the problem of aesthetics? That a genuine, healthy person loves reality, loves Nature, loves man and loves life. The genteel aesthetes — both the philosophers and practitioners — and the artists filled life with all sorts of rubbish, with painted, discordant and stylised aesthetic trash; they maintained, moreover, that all this was the reflection of ideas, a divine radiance shining down into our dim world; that it was geniuses who were the bearers of these magnificent gifts, at the sight of which our pathetic reality must immediately bow down in shame. All this was an attempt by a class — which was not merely divorced from life as a whole, but which was also beginning, in a social way, to die — to discredit living reality and with it to discredit the struggle, too, to impose its own artificial paradise, its own artistic, narcotic Garden of Eden on the other classes, on the youth, on the new rising generation.

Chernyshevsky indeed defended the sacred purity of democracy from all such pseudo-aesthetics, which, although beneficent at first sight, was in fact trying to poison young democracy. This explains Chernyshevsky’s suspicious attitude towards art. It made him reject

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phantom, which merely assumes the form of that which actually exists, without its transitoriness, weightiness, firmness or fortuitousness, etc.

Chernyshevsky condemned all such forms of art as fictitious and feeble, and showed that, from a genuinely aesthetic standpoint — the maximum development of life — such forms fall well short of reality and have no real right to exist.

But it does not follow from this that Chernyshevsky believed that art should not exist at all, as Pisarev thought he believed; nor does it follow that he did not understand that art has an extremely important role to play. Here is an extract which shows this:

In defining beauty as the complete manifestation of an idea in a concrete case, we must inevitably arrive at the conclusion that “beauty in reality is only a phantom, placed there by our imagination”; from this it follows that “strictly speaking, beauty is a figment of our imagination; in reality (or [as Hegel would say]: in Nature) there is no true beauty”. From this conclusion it follows that “art has as its source the strivings of man to make up for the lack of beauty in objective reality”, and that “beauty, created by art, is on a higher level than the beauty of objective reality” — all these thoughts make up the essence [of Hegel’s aesthetics and are part of it] not by accident but as the result of strictly logical development of the basic concept of beauty.

As against this, from the definition “beauty is life” it follows that the genuine, highest form of beauty is precisely that which is found in reality, and not that which has been created by art; with such an idea of beauty in reality, the origin of art must be explained as coming from a completely different source; after this, the material significance of art likewise appears in a totally different light. [16]

Chernyshevsky showed that man’s aesthetic emotions are by no means connected only with beauty. Of course other aesthetes knew this as well, and spoke about such aesthetic phenomena as the elevated, the tragic and the comic. I shall refrain from analysing the elevated and the comic, because there is little to quarrel with here, but before going on to Chernyshevsky’s ideas on the social role of art, I shall dwell for a moment on his definition of the tragic. Plekhanov considered this part of Chernyshevsky’s *Aesthetics* to be somewhat

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Tragedy in Aristotle, Hegel, and Chernyshevsky

The prevalent idea of the tragic in Chernyshevsky's time was one which had been inherent in the great tragedians of the ancient world. In his immortal *Poetics* (on which, by the way, Chernyshevsky wrote a special study) Aristotle explained the basic idea of tragedy as the ancient world saw it. Hegel and Fichte, the kings of aesthetics in the middle of the last century, borrowed much from this idea. They interpreted it in this way: Tragedy depicts the fate of a great and significant person, an outstanding individual, who perishes as a result of his tragic guilt. We are sorry that this individual perishes, because he is a splendid person, but we must recognise that justice has been done. What is his guilt? He represents strength, but he cannot come to terms with his environment; he bears within him something new and original, and he does not bow down before that which is generally accepted, before the law. The Greeks defined this as *hubris* — pride. *Hubris* — the feeling of pride in one's own independence, the attempt to place human laws against divine laws — comes from strength, from a strong body, a strong spirit, a strong social position. The fact that this individual is outstanding leads to his downfall. In an earlier age Herodotus said that once a person stands head and shoulders above the rest the gods will inevitably kill him, for they are envious. The gods regard an above-average person as a criminal, because they are the guardians of standards. If you have risen above average, you have become interesting precisely because of your abnormality, your above-average position. You will therefore perish because everything that exceeds the average perishes.

From where did the Greeks get this idea? Why was it necessary for Greek democracy? For the same reason that ostracism was necessary. In this democratic environment, an extremely unstable and restless one, individual demagogues, no matter to which class they belonged, would try to seize power, to trample others underfoot; one after the other petty and strong tyrants would rise up under different names — now as dictators, now as public orators, now as leaders of an aristocratic mutiny. But the genuine middle-class democracy, with its Areopagus, and all the institutions which arose to protect the nation's stability, created a definite political moral code, with which they fought against this very *hubris*. They said: "If you leave the middle classes and break the laws of your fatherland established by the middle-class democracy (which was dominant in Athens), you will perish." This was a social antidote, as most ethics are. They wanted to instil in people a fear of becoming too

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and no one explained why. Here the profound distrust of this unstable democracy is revealed. Fichte, himself an individualist and a defender of the individual, which came to the fore with the French Revolution, said that even if the heavens and the stars should fall, the freedom of the moral individual would never be abolished. But Hegel erecting the ancient democratic ideal on a new social foundation, said that a person who puffed himself up and set himself against the eternal and lawful progress of the idea was merely laughable.

Chernyshevsky was extremely incensed by all this, and rightly so. He said that great people are sometimes happy, sometimes not. Anything might happen to anyone: you cannot frighten us with your talk. He was amused by the doctrine of the existence of fate. All this in the end was merely old wives' tales, a feature of religion; it simply scared people with so-called eternal laws, which in fact had been established by a sharply defined social environment in order to fight against human independence. This is not tragedy. Tragedy is to be found in every terrible event, in every terrible ending, in each of mankind's sufferings, even if completely unmerited. And indeed why is it tragic if some one is guilty and perishes; and not tragic if he is innocent and perishes? After a series of brilliant victories, Gustavus Adolphus was killed in a battle by a stray bullet — why is this not tragic?

According to Plekhanov, Chernyshevsky is wrong in declaring that everything terrible is also tragic. There is a difference between the tragic and the merely terrible. There is nothing to be learned from the merely terrible, there is no material for a genuinely tragic work of creation. Hegel and Aristotle, according to Plekhanov, are more correct. Tragedy is a logical death. Its significance is not that the hero perishes by the hand of fate and envious gods, however, but that the prophets and forerunners of a new world and new convictions, clash with the old world and inevitably perish. This fate of the prophets of a new world, which seems to us a splendid fate, evoking our sympathy, and yet is also an inevitable fate, because they are the first swallows of a spring which has not yet set in — all this is true tragedy.

Plekhanov said that Chernyshevsky's position on tragedy was an abstract one, taken out of its social context, and that he did not approach the subject as, in Plekhanov's opinion, a Marxist should approach it, that is, from a point of view of class struggle.

I should like to object here that tragedy is not always the tragedy of the forerunners; that it is not merely the collision between an individual and society or between a representative of a

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not tragic, or why, if a house collapses and women and children are crushed to death, this is merely an accident, and not a tragedy.

What is the origin of suffering, of a premature and horrible death? It is the result of our weakness in the face of Nature, the result of what is called pure chance. Forces beyond our control sometimes destroy our existence, and these are not necessarily social forces. The bourgeois social order plays its part here: thanks to its disorder, its scatteredness, its disjointedness, we are weak in the face of Nature. Marx said that people would need religion so long as they needed comforting for being weak in the face of Nature. When man has conquered Nature, he will no longer need religion, and the feeling of tragedy which imbues the whole of our existence will disappear. When Engels spoke of the “leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom,” he said that to live in the kingdom of necessity is tragedy. It means to be forced to act against one’s wishes, to enclose one’s life in a frame which does not correspond to one’s desires. The leap into the kingdom of freedom, on the other hand, means that one can mould one’s life according to one’s desires — that is, first and foremost, according to the laws of one’s own existence, and this marks the end of human tragedy. Man is gradually mastering Nature. From this point of view, capitalism appears as a state of affairs in which man falls under the power of a disorganised society, under the power of the machine — the weapon which he himself has created for the enslavement of Nature. But capitalism is the final enslavement. When socialism has transformed the machine into the genuine servant of organised society, whose will becomes law, the transition from man’s tragic introduction to history to the real, rational history of mankind will have taken place.

This is why I consider that Chernyshevsky was basically quite right, and that Plekhanov confused very important but specific and partial tragedy with huge general tragedy, which Chernyshevsky quite realistically opposed to the artifices dictated by the class interests of bourgeois democracy.

The idealists argue and try to cast doubts on the existence and stability of reality. They say that reality is transitory and fleeting, or even that there is essentially no reality; where is it? As you said your last word, it has already gone; the moment which you call the present slips by, and it is impossible to stop it even for a second; you are already living in the future which, in its turn, will become the past. Where is it then, this reality? It is simply an imaginary, fleeting

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Chernyshevsky was aware of this line of reasoning, and this was his reply:

It would be as boring to relive what one has already experienced, as it is to listen a second time to a funny story, however interesting it might have been the first time. It is necessary to distinguish real desires from imagined desires, which do not really want to be satisfied at all; it is a desire of the imagination that beauty should in reality never fade. “Life surges ahead and bears away the beauty of reality in its current,” say the aestheticians. True, but as life surges ahead, so do our desires, that is, they alter in content; consequently, regrets at the disappearance of a beautiful phenomenon are a product of our imagination — a beautiful phenomenon disappears, its task completed, leaving behind as much aesthetic enjoyment as the present day could contain; tomorrow will be a new day, with new requirements, which only new beauty can satisfy. If beauty were in reality stationary and immutable — “immortal”, as the aesthetes demand — it would become boring and repugnant. A living person is not fond of the motionless in life; for this reason he can never feast his gaze enough on living beauty, whereas he is quickly sated by the sight of a *tableau vivant*, which the high priests of art prefer to living scenes. [17]

Here are two diametrically opposite philosophies. An apology for peace and quiet: a person has found something he likes, and so he bids time to stop and life to wait. He wants everything to stand still at this instant. Very soon genuine enjoyment, a novice's enjoyment, will be gone, and a blissful wonderment will take its place — a sensation which, as the priests promise, we shall enjoy in paradise when we gaze for eternity upon the Lord our God, our souls melting in bliss — Nirvana, a heavenly plunging into non-existence, into oblivion. All these motionless beauties are means of self-hypnosis, as sure a means of dulling our senses as the use of drugs. It is running away from life.

This is not what Chernyshevsky wants. He wants life to pulsate — only then is it beautiful. He wants it to be constantly altering. This is the revolutionary view of life, an idea which is inherent in the genuinely active nature, and only such natures are worthy of life. Those people who consider peace and quiet to be the main thing in life can go off to the graveyard — they will find it there.

~~Chernyshevsky vs. Pleshcheyev on the Significance of Art~~

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Let us turn to an analysis of the clash between these two great writers — Chernyshevsky and Plekhanov — on the question of the significance of art. This is how Chernyshevsky defines it:

The general characteristic sign of art, which reveals its essence, is the reproduction of life; works of art often have another meaning — the explanation of life; often, too, they are the evaluation of life's phenomena. [17]

In his opinion art is realistic and reproduces life, those features of life which might interest man. Essential features are depicted in the foreground, while less significant ones are omitted altogether. The effect of this is the explanation of life. Explanation here does not mean commentary or translation into rational language. It means the following: by reading Gogol's lines on Plyushkin, you get a clear understanding of what miserly, inhuman and lifeless old age is. It may perhaps never be encountered in life itself, or, at any rate, not so clearly understood.

The basic significance of art is the reproduction of all that in which man is interested in reality. But someone who is interested in life's phenomena cannot help, whether consciously or subconsciously, evaluating them; even if he wished to, a poet or an artist, both incapable of ceasing to be human in general, could not refuse to offer his evaluation of what he has depicted — it is revealed in his work, and this is the new significance of works of art, by which art becomes one of man's moral activities. [18]

So as not to quote too much, let us stop here and put what has been said into order.

What is art, according to Chernyshevsky?

Man is interested in many things in life; he wants not only to grasp the object of his interest with his intellect, but also absorb it, note it, approach it closely, study it with head and heart, and here he is helped by the artist. Belinsky has already established (and Chernyshevsky makes the same point) that when an artist talks about things, he explains them not by concepts but by images. But his images are explanatory images. Why? Because they avoid the fortuitous and give only that which is most important. In this way, life's phenomena become comprehensible, clearer and more convincing. But, of course, conviction is not achieved by

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his artistic works, but he considers it wrong. He says that our evaluation of life must come from this explanation by images thrown into bold relief. Whether you love or hate, whether this or that character or phenomenon, depicted by the artist, evokes pity or respect in you — depends on your whole set-up, on your convictions, on how you would react to it in life. Only in life, perhaps, you would not be able to grasp it immediately and would pass it by, whereas the artist has given you, in his image, the most essential and you have absorbed it.

Can one say that there is anything in this judgement of art, which we could not accept today? Yet this judgement of Chernyshevsky's — that an artist explains, that an artist evaluates life — frightens Plekhanov, and he declares: As far as the evaluation of a genuine artist is concerned, the philosophical, ethical or social influence of his works on people has nothing to do with it at all. Such an influence is, of course, possible, but there is no need to try and burden art with these academic aims. Plekhanov, of course, renounces art for art's sake; it goes without saying that an artist is caught up in the ideological life of his age, if he is indeed a great man, especially if he is a representative of the leading class. But, says Plekhanov, the enlightener in Chernyshevsky is revealed by the fact that he considers the especial significance of art to lie, not in the artist's images, not in the intuitive, not in that which distinguishes specifically artistic literature from intellectual activity in general, but in that which makes it akin to intellectual activity. Plekhanov quotes with horror Chernyshevsky's words that poetry invariably involves all types of knowledge. It seems to him that Chernyshevsky valued in art precisely that which was least important — mere trifles and trivialities; that he valued that which was there, but only incidentally; it is precisely by not using those elements which make it akin to the intellect that art has its most powerful, most genuine and most educative effect. Plekhanov sees here a flaw in Chernyshevsky's ideas on art, which springs, in his opinion, from the latter's notorious intellectualism.

Plekhanov and Chernyshevsky would agree that artistic creation is a moral activity. It is impossible to consider the creative work of a "pure" artist (whom both Plekhanov and Chernyshevsky rejected) to be moral activity; if works of art give an evaluation, and if as a result of this evaluation we become wiser about life, more able to discern life's phenomena and receive a fresh stimulus to progressive action, then, of course, the artist has fulfilled his moral mission.

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ulterior motive is to force the artist to carry out this moral mission. Plekhanov says: We look at things, how they arise in Nature and in society, and we elucidate their causes. For example, we can see in front of us a whole epoch in which artists are not fulfilling their moral mission, but are occupied with what is called art for art's sake; yet this cannot be otherwise, just as roses cannot bloom in winter, or snow fall in July. Those people who are divorced from life, who are not satisfied by reality, unfailingly turn towards the world of dreams and fantasy. We must understand and recognise this. Every flower has its season — and in our age flowers will grow that correspond to our age. But to dictate one's will, to say what art should be, this is impossible, says Plekhanov. We must forget such thoughts as: We want this kind of art, art must be like this. No, take art as life has made it, and explain in Marxian terms which class has expressed its tendencies in it. Plekhanov says the following in his article “Chernyshevsky's Theory of Aesthetics”:

In our article on Belinsky's literary views we said that, in his arguments with supporters of pure art, he abandoned the standpoint of a *dialectic* for that of an *enlightener*. But nevertheless Belinsky was more willing to see the problem from a historical viewpoint. It was Chernyshevsky who transferred the problem once and for all into the realm of *abstract theorising* on the “essence” of art, or rather, on *what art should be*. “Science does not consider itself higher than reality, and there is no disgrace in this,” he said at the end of his dissertation. “Neither must art consider itself higher than reality... Let art be satisfied with its lofty function: to be a substitute for reality in its absence, and to be a textbook of life for man.”

Plekhanov, one might say, appeals to heaven:

These are the views of the purest kind of enlightener. To be a textbook of life means to serve the intellectual development of society. It is this that the enlightener sees as the main function of art. [19]

Let us take the bull by the horns and see what it is that Plekhanov wants, first in the sphere of aesthetics and then in the sphere of ethics.

Plekhanov wants a Marxist, analytical and objective viewpoint on things; he says: Prescribe nothing to life, rather elucidate it. We shall not discuss whether Plekhanov had similar

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thoughts in every sphere, but he maintained that, in the sphere of art, a Marxist should never say: Art must be such and such, but should always say: Art is such and such, and this is why.

Yes, before Marxism people had only a vague idea of the essence of social phenomena. Chernyshevsky was a pre-Marxist materialist, so he could easily exaggerate the power of human intellect and human will. As you know, Chernyshevsky did not believe in the people or the power of the people, and Plekhanov is right in saying that Chernyshevsky was not a Narodnik [20] at all. He loved the people and wanted them to be rid of oppression, but did not think that the people themselves would achieve this. The people would fight, would rise up for their rights in a universal rebellion, only when aroused by another force — the intelligentsia, the progressive intelligentsia, with him, Nikolai Gavrilovich, Dobrolyubov and other people of their type at its head. The intelligentsia and its revolutionary organisations could free the people by the incessant spreading of propaganda amongst others like themselves, by agitation amongst the people, and, perhaps, by terror (as you heard at the beginning of my lecture, Chernyshevsky said unequivocally: “I am not afraid of filth or of bloodshed”).

Plekhanov says that this is utopian socialism, and he is right here without a doubt. From this point of view it is the action of an enlightener. [21] Chernyshevsky was a utopian, but let us consider what Marxism alters in Chernyshevsky's ideas on art.

Marxism has given a correct view of the laws according to which social phenomena develop. But if we remove from Marxism the idea of consciousness, of the conscious controlling of phenomena, of the active role we play; if we take up the standpoint that we must look upon social phenomena as processes, and discard any idea of active participation, then this would be Menshevik Marxism, in its most naked form. Is it not true that we are now the vanguard of the huge class, the proletariat, organised into a party, the greatest manifestation of conscious awareness which has ever existed.

We administer a state and comprise a government, which is an expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat. We understand that it is not simply a matter of issuing a decree for everything to be as we want it. Of course not. But can one say that we are not to discuss the form of this or that phenomenon? If so, we would be the purest of pure Mensheviks. But we are Marxist Bolsheviks, Marxist statesmen and we argue as follows: Our first act dictated by

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study of society, the study of the trends of development of productive forces, the study of trade and economics as a whole, a knowledge of the ideology of individual groups — the “superstructures” above this economic organism. But does this mean that we must merely confine ourselves to a definition of these objective forces? No — we do not spend our time underground: we are not an intelligentsia with no links with the masses, with nothing for us to do except observe the progress of life — to the left or to the right. Our premises, of course, must be the objective data of life; but we are a leading party capable of exerting a tremendous influence on the course of events. We have to sketch out a plan on the basis of an objective and scientific analysis, and there is practically nothing in the life of the country, including its culture, which this plan would not concern. How is it possible to assume, for example, that we can avoid the problem of which kind of literature we should value, develop and support, and which we should fight against? Everybody knows that the Party Central Committee has issued a manifesto on literature.

To take an example from the sphere of social economics. The development of country life under bourgeois conditions is as follows: the middle layer — the peasants with average-sized holdings — divides into the poor peasants and the kulaks. An upper stratum inevitably arises and forms a rural bourgeoisie. But the effect of these laws is quite different under the dictatorship of the proletariat, under the power of the Soviets. We not only affirm this, but state plainly and unequivocally that it depends on us, since we support the poor and unite them and the middle peasants into collective farms, bring pressure to bear on the kulak, alienate the middle peasant from him, take away his political opportunities and subject him to high taxation.

A tree which has grown in the forest gives sour fruit, but after grafting it gives beautiful sweet pears. We, by consciously altering Nature's phenomena, are just such gardeners; and we do not have to be miracle-workers either; this is no miracle — it is active use of knowledge, and it is Bolshevik Marxism.

Chernyshevsky imagined that he and his set were already controlling social phenomena, whereas this tiny handful of intelligentsia could in fact do nothing socially significant, could not induce the peasants to follow them, could not organise them. For this reason Chernyshevsky was a utopian. Marx and his disciples established that, for there to be the

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organised. Then in the midst of the proletariat, the Party begins to be formed as its conscious vanguard, whose power lies in the knowledge of the laws by which society develops — a society in which the proletariat plays the progressive role. Marxism, scientific sociology, safeguards us from fantastic and arbitrary theories and points to the real trend of history. But if, apart from this knowledge, we achieve nothing else, then we shall merely be swept along with the current. In Russia, for example, capitalism only reached a very low stage of development; there were very few workers in the towns, and a social revolution would have become inevitable only after many years. Should we really only have acted within the limits permitted by fate?

The Narodniks, who wanted to rely on the support of the peasant millions and stir up a revolution, were of course unable to do this. But perhaps the proletariat will prove to have sufficient strength to do what the others could not? This is a step backwards, according to Plekhanov. At the Stockholm Congress Plekhanov shouted to Lenin: “I can sense something old in your new ideas.” To what was he referring? To Chernyshevsky. Yet he was wrong if he thought there was anything new in this — it was genuine Marxism. In 1877 Marx wrote his famous letter to Mikhailovsky, which all the Mensheviks puzzled over for a long time, before coming to the conclusion that Marx was simply joking. But Marx was a serious person and would never have started joking in his letters to Russian revolutionaries. This letter agitated and tormented one of the finest men in the country: Gleb Ivanovich Uspensky. He read and reread it, shedding many bitter tears over it. Why? Marx wrote that Russia had let slip a unique opportunity: a group of her revolutionary-conscious intelligentsia could have stood at the head of a peasant revolutionary movement and changed the course of events, the course of historical development. But now, Marx wrote, the moment had passed, this could not be done, and Russia had irrevocably entered onto the road of capitalism. Uspensky understood this and believed in the truth of Marx’s words, but the Menshevik “Marxists” said that Marx was either joking or mistaken. Uspensky took to drink and went out of his mind; amongst other factors, Marx’s letter played a part in this. It seemed to Uspensky that as this moment had passed, the country would perish. But Marx did not have this in mind at all; he said: Like the other countries, the “unholy” countries, your “holy Rus” has embarked on the road of capitalist development.

In other words, now wait for the proletariat. Once the proletariat is there, then your time will

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its column of seven to eight million proved to be the real guides and organisers of the hundred-million strong army of peasants.

We followed this “old” idea of Lenin’s. Capitalism indeed had not sufficiently matured here, and the proletariat still did not form the majority of the population; but, taking advantage of the historical state of affairs in our country which prepared the way for the peasants’ agrarian uprising, we considered it necessary to risk a social revolution.

People objected: All right, granted that you have succeeded in getting power into your own hands, but what are you going to do with these peasants now? After they have got their land there is nothing more that you can do with them. Surely you do not think that you can build socialism in a country where most of the population are peasants?

The Marxist Bolsheviks, however, were not alarmed. They said: We do not think, we know that this is possible. It is possible, if we manage to build a firm Soviet state, a dictatorship of the proletariat which will lead the peasants. In such circumstances it is most certainly possible for the peasants to move forward to socialism by their own, characteristic method — the co-operative method, which includes both common ploughland and collectivisation; a method which was discussed at the Party’s Fifteenth Congress.

It is this distinction between Menshevik fatalism and Bolshevik action, which we must remember in our discussions on literature.

Has present-day criticism the right to talk about literature from the point of view of what it should be? Can it, has it the right to say that writers are bound to write to order, that the best readers demand material to increase their knowledge, to study the life of the classes and social groups of the country, in this transitory period? Have we the right to demand that writers depict positive characters, who illustrate what a young citizen of our republic should be like, to demand that writers be able to brand and show as despicable in our eyes those vices and shortcomings which impede our development? Have we the right to impose these ethical demands on literature? Are we right or not when we turn our backs on the “sweet sounds and prayers,” and declare that our literature must be an ethical force, must aid our self-education, that our literature is in itself a process of self-education for our class? I think that we are right.

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Plekhanov himself said that each class creates a literature in its own likeness and image, for its own needs; he said that when a class progresses all its actions are conscious actions. When, for example, the age of chivalry at its height created the chivalrous novel which was to increase the knight's respect for himself, this was not done unconsciously but with a considerable amount of class consciousness.

Of course, not all the culture of a class arises consciously, but the more conscious, the more organised it is, the more conscious will be all its actions and development.

The proletarian class cannot allow literature to grow like mushrooms in a wood. A gardener's, cultivator's attitude to life is characteristic of the proletariat, the new rising class. Its policy is not only an explanation of reality in the face of the laws of Nature, but also a technical combination which will alter the development of phenomena. This is the active quality in Marxism.

This is why I say that Chernyshevsky's aesthetics, with its impassioned hatred for the concept of art as a substitute for reality, with its deep love of reality, with its desire for the growth, development and flowering of genuine life, with its negative attitude towards lifelessness and its claim that art reflects what interests man, and does not simply reflect everything like a mirror — this is why I say that Chernyshevsky's aesthetics is both important and acceptable to us. Chernyshevsky's basic line of thought that art evaluates life — that it evokes from us a definite emotional reaction to what is depicted — and that the artist has a moral influence and helps the rise of culture, is absolutely correct. We declare that, although Chernyshevsky was not a Marxist, we Marxists can accept his teaching. Not possessing the Marxist method, for instance, he would not have been able to explain the reason for the transition in Russian literature from the 20s to the 30s. We have a Marxist spotlight which illuminates the hidden roots of events, the necessary link of phenomena — this is our tremendous advantage. But in possessing the means of scientific analysis, we must not forget the active role we have to play, a role which Chernyshevsky understood so well.

Chernyshevsky's Ethics

Let us now make a small excursion into the realm of Chernyshevsky's ethics. Plekhanov did not devote very many pages to this subject, but what he wrote is extraordinarily profound and

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effective. Chernyshevsky's theory of ethics is not particularly complicated and can be summed up in a small number of categorical theses.

In order to determine the essence of Chernyshevsky's ethical viewpoint, Plekhanov quotes the following passage from him:

When one examines closely the impulses which control people's actions, it turns out that every action, good or bad, noble or mean, heroic or cowardly, comes from one source in everyone. A person behaves as it is most pleasurable for him to behave; he is controlled by a common sense which makes him refuse that which will bring him least advantage least pleasure, and turn to that which will bring him most advantage, most pleasure. [22]

Here Chernyshevsky anticipated the question: Did he deny self-sacrifice, the fact that a man can die for his loved ones, for his country, for an ideal, etc.? Chernyshevsky did not deny it. Thus it seems that this is a somewhat eccentric egoist, who would prefer his own annihilation, as being more advantageous. Chernyshevsky was not at all put out by this, and said:

A fastidious person would rather face starvation than touch food which has been defiled by filth; for someone accustomed to self-respect, death is far easier than humiliation. [23]

This is an extremely important ethical position, bearing witness to the fact that Chernyshevsky's ethics are by no means primitive. He says that there are occasions when without sacrificing oneself, one dooms oneself to an extraordinarily wretched life; a life which would perhaps be outwardly humiliating — one would be living in fear of something or other, or in slavery, amid humiliation, insult and suffering, etc. — or perhaps one's own self-respect would, as a result, fall to such an extent that all joy of life would vanish. A person who does not consider himself worthy to live, who despises himself, who constantly hears a voice condemning him — such a person has no lust for life, and if he is intelligent he will prefer to die. Better to die than to live a life full of humiliation.

Plekhanov is quite right when he says that a man's preferences or the way he behaves do not in fact depend on his reason or common sense at all. Even if we adopted a rational standpoint,

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man prefer to steal so as not to be hungry, whereas another prefers to starve rather than steal? Can we really say that there are completely impartial scales on which both actions can be weighed and that everybody solves the same problem in the same way? We know that different people solve the same problem in different ways, depending on what they have inherited and how they have been brought up, as Plekhanov quite correctly remarks. Even if we begin to talk about rational behaviour — that which arises out of reasoning — even in this case, what one prefers depends not on the force of one's reasoning, but on the degree of pleasure, liking, on the value which one places on the advantage to be gained. This depends on character, on the way, in other words, in which a given person has been moulded. From our modern scientific psychological standpoint, we can say that it depends on what reflexes the person in question possesses, on what his prevailing reactions are. Having established this, we realise that reasoning is a complex reaction which, very often, never occurs. Action does not always arise out of so-called thought, that is, out of a complex pattern of different reflexes, some of which banish the rest; very often people react immediately, without thinking. A good or bad character, a courageous or cowardly one, depends not so much on the amount of reasoning capacity as on the complex of reflexes.

Plekhanov pays a great deal of attention, quite rightly of course, to the fact that a person's character is formed, not spontaneously, but by society — the example of his family, the street and the school, the barracks, the press and public opinion. His social environment is a vast educational apparatus, in which society strives to make man, by nature untamed, into a social being — strives, that is, to distort, or on the contrary, to ennoble his instincts so that they become social instincts, so that society receives the greatest possible benefit from them. According to most people, moral behaviour is that which is of benefit to society as a whole; it can therefore be said that society is bringing constant influence to bear on people, so that, instead of becoming criminal, or violating the general rules, they act according to these rules and behave correctly. To induce man to behave correctly and according to the generally established rules is the aim of every society.

Chernyshevsky's reasoning appears from this point of view to be almost childish. A person, whether he reasons or not, acts as a result of the reflexes which have been formed in him, mostly under the pressure of society's educational force; Plekhanov speaks about this as follows:

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Let us suppose that we have a society not divided into estates or classes. In such a society those actions of individuals, which coincide with the interests of all will be considered good, whereas those which contradict these interests will be considered bad. In other words, at the source of every judgement on good or evil, will lie what might be called the egoism of the whole, or *public egoism*. But the egoism of the whole does not exclude the altruism of each person, or *individual altruism*. On the contrary, it is its source: society strives to educate its members, so that they place the interests of society above their own private interests; the more a man's behaviour *satisfies* this demand of society, the more self-denying, moral and altruistic this person will be. And the more his behaviour *violates* this demand, the more selfish, immoral and egoistic he will be. This is the criterion which has always — with greater or lesser consciousness of the fact — been applied when the question of the altruism or egoism of the behaviour of such and such a person is considered; the whole possible difference here between the one and the other depends precisely on the nature of the whole whose interests in the given case are placed above those of the individuals. [...]

Man's education in the spirit of morality means that his behaviour, which is of benefit to society, becomes an instinctive need (Kant's "categorical imperative"). The stronger this need, the more moral the individual. People are called heroes when they cannot but obey this need, even when its satisfaction goes decidedly against their own material interests — threatens them with death, for instance. The enlighteners, Chernyshevsky among them, did not usually take this into account. It might, moreover, be added that Kant was no less mistaken than the enlighteners, when he maintained that moral impulses bear no relation to benefit. Neither was he able in this case to see things from the point of view of development, and trace *individual altruism* to *public egoism*. [24]

Brought up entirely in the spirit of a given society, or a given class, a man acts as if instinctively, and those reflexes which have been instilled into him by social pressure are transformed into instincts. This cannot be doubted. And yet a significant "but" arises here, which I shall now speak about.

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be in no way what he wants. For example: a house is on fire, and a person must decide what is better — to burn to death or to throw himself from the fifth floor. Under normal circumstances he would of course not have thrown himself out, but here he is forced to do so. It does not follow from this, however, that he likes jumping from the fifth floor. In this case it is merely the lesser of two evils. And always, under all circumstances, a person will choose the least evil or the greatest good.

You think it was you who made the choice? Plekhanov objects. No; it was your upbringing and your character which chose for you, and upbringing and character do not depend on you yourself. Much depends on the kind of body you were born with, and even more on the kind of tastes, instincts and concepts which social life, of which you are a part, has developed in you.

This is, of course, true; but from this it would seem we should conclude that, in the sphere of morals, we are also to a greater or lesser extent observers. We watch people act, but it turns out that they are not, in reality, acting at all, that is, they are not committing any acts. A process is being performed, in which it is not the people who are choosing, but something in them which is choosing. This something is a social something; and everywhere, in everything, we see merely the spraying of the social ocean. In nobody can there be any active desire, any active creation.

Chernyshevsky's point of view is one of human activity. He says that man chooses the least evil or the greatest good, and is guided by this in life; man for this reason is an egoist. To say: I am a hero, a benefactor, etc., is meaningless. Everybody does what he finds to his liking. If, when I like something, others like it too, so much the better. Chernyshevsky considers that an honest, courageous, social person cannot demand any reward for himself. Such a person will receive his reward from the action itself. This is a very fine, honest and pure attitude, but it is by no means the most important point. What is important is the theory of man's behaviour. Like Holbach and Helvetius, Chernyshevsky thought that man chooses the laws of his behaviour; Plekhanov says, on the other hand, that everything takes place according to a law, and that there is no choice; man has only the illusion that he is choosing, whereas in fact he is choosing according to the laws of his nature, a nature which has arisen as a result of social influences.

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Why then do these rationalists, these enlighteners appear? When do they arise? They have arisen, and we must explain this. Why did Helvetius and Chernyshevsky think that everyone was an egoist, a person who chose what suited him best? What does it mean when certain epochs produce people who say: There are no morals, commandments or duties; man is completely free and chooses whatever he likes most — and the person who realises this is a genuine person? What is the historical reason for these enlighteners?

It happens when stable morals crumble; when the morals of a ruling class and its whole epoch collapse; when a new class comes to the fore, which has as yet no established morals, but which initially advances in the form of a revolutionary vanguard, destroying the old system.

These “critically thinking people,” who shatter the old system, appear, if you like, as the natural expression of the process of decay of the old stable world and of the appearance of a new society. One can say, for example, that the Rakhmetovs, the Lopukhovs and all Chernyshevsky’s other heroes, that Chernyshevsky himself and Dobrolyubov — none of them had been brought up by one or another class in the spirit of definite reactions. I do not think that their priest’s, seminarist environment instilled in them definite reactions, which they understood as a new set of morals. I think this idea is incorrect. They entered life as people who doubted the morals of their fathers — such morals no longer appealed to them at all. They entered life at a moment when the morals of the petty bourgeoisie, out of which they had arisen, had already been shattered. They were no longer in the power of these morals, but the laws of autocracy and the morals of the nobility, etc., were also unacceptable to them. And it was against all this that they set their freedom.

From the viewpoint of materialist determinism, their freedom was, of course, illusory — but not so from the social aspect.

They declared: We renounce every duty; we do not wish to act according to any commandment, we want to be free. And they wanted their right to freedom to be realised. We know that, even in some ancient societies, there were people who were unhampered by any firm commandments, who declared that man is the measure of all things. Such people were frequently cynical, because as soon as one has denied the existence of God, of the soul, of duties, laws and standards of behaviour, then every delicious feeling and moment must be pursued — “everything is permitted.” Remember in Dostoevsky how Smerdyakov

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soul, and “everything is permitted” is only a phrase to you, whereas Smerdyakov would go and commit a vile deed. There is a Smerdyakov in each person: give him freedom and he will behave vilely. This is how Dostoyevsky understands this amoralism. But when people are set onto new paths by a new, revolutionary way of life, they do not have vile deeds in mind at all; they announce their freedom — they need freedom, because they find they possess a special spiritual bent, or as we would say now, a definite type of reflex.

Vladimir Solovyov poked fun at Chernyshevsky's philosophy by saying: “Man is descended from the apes, after death burdock will grow out of him — therefore let us die for the community,” and then roaring with laughter, clutching his sides. Surely, if man is descended not from the apes, but from Adam, into whose breast the Lord God breathed a soul in his own likeness and image, then why die for the community? In that case, of course, one would have to wait until one's soul, having abandoned its earthly shell, returned to the Lord God and lived there in everlasting bliss. If death did not result in burdock growing out of one's body, but in the gates of paradise or hell opening, then it would be a completely different matter. Solovyov considers that, if there is no soul and death means the end of everything, then we must inevitably be scoundrels and will inevitably commit vile deeds against one another. Only if there is heaven and hell, reward and punishment, will people not commit vile deeds. This is, in essence, a medieval, even a primitive idea. The learned Solovyov fails to understand Chernyshevsky not from the majestic heights where he imagines himself to be, but just like some primitive savage. Chernyshevsky says that if life is a short-lived biological process, then let us make it as happy as possible; but it is impossible to make life as happy as possible for the individual because, in the first place, it is terribly difficult to create your own happiness in an atmosphere of hatred, egoism, pressure from those stronger than you, etc.; and secondly, there is your conscience; it is difficult, agonising, impossible even, to take advantage of your good fortune, knowing that next to you people are dying, and that you are taking advantage of their forced labour, their deaths, just so you can be happy. For this reason, a social revolution is necessary in order to create life which is really rational, a life which will mean happiness for everybody. Once this is then the only genuine rational happiness, the only real justification of life, is participation in a revolution, working for it with all one's strength. And if it turns out that one generation cannot do it — well then, we will do it in several generations; if it turns out that we will not be the ones to fulfil this task, that we cannot fulfil this task by ourselves, let us act in the name of the people. This is how that generation built a

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bridge from amoralism, from the theory of egoism to service of the people, something of which Vladimir Solovyov is ignorant.

Such feelings are typical of a revolutionary-minded person who regards everything critically and wishes to act rationally. Of course, a Marxist, standing to one side as an observer of such ethics, will say: All this is, in essence, an illusion; behaviour is, in fact, predetermined by laws. But Plekhanov himself, in his brilliant criticism of fatalistic determinism, correctly remarks, that given the fact that every step we take is predetermined, that each of our actions is performed according to a law, it does not follow that we act blindly. From the point of view of the impartial observer, the future historian, everything will appear as a natural process. But in our eyes, the eyes of people who live and fight in given conditions, everything is willed, a definite action, a creative activity. We feel like this because the process we are explaining is the process of life itself, the process of organic creative activity.

Plekhanov understood this very well, but in this case he went somewhat astray. He should have taken into account that the ethical ideas of Chernyshevsky and his fellow thinkers not only corresponded objectively to the historical circumstances of the time, but were also the most appropriate, the most capable of developing people's will to action — of jolting man out of his stagnant environment into a life full of bright creative activity — a life hailed by Chernyshevsky, Pisarev and Dobrolyubov.

We all, of course, realise that, for example, the formation of the new set of morals which we need is a complicated social process. But does this mean that we should not at once actively set about revising the fundamentals of morality? Here in front of us is a young proletarian who acts always, without reasoning first, in the proletarian manner. His social upbringing has evidently become instinctive, and for this we can envy him. But this is far from being the case with everyone. The person who lacks such a mature social upbringing, who, on the one hand, wants to act like a genuine proletarian and yet, on the other, feels his own passions, prejudices and failings pushing him in the opposite direction — this person will be faced with an inner moral conflict. Are we able to educate such people? Yes, we are. The bourgeoisie strives to educate, to transform certain reflexes and modes of behaviour into instincts. We must do this, too. We must do this in the nursery, in the school, by means of direct environmental influence, by influencing each other and ourselves, so that the proletarian elements triumph and become

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its web. When one set of morals has crumbled and another is still being formed, when you have actively to create the rules of your behaviour, how is it possible not to reason? When someone turned to St. Paul with a question about God, he answered: "And who are you to ask about the Lord our God?" We are not satisfied with such an "apostolic" answer; we want to know, we want to explain why such rules and standards of behaviour are the only rational and lawful ones. Who will say to me: "Don't think about this, because in fact man does not think, for it is the reflexes formed by society which are speaking in him"? What is this to me, when I need to know how to act tomorrow; whether or not I should steal a book from a friend and sell it? If I do not do this I shall be unable to repay my debts and shall starve; whereas if I do it, I shall despise myself. I am not able to sleep at night, tossing from side to side, wondering how to act.

There are always moral conflicts, hesitations and contradictions, but especially when morals are on the decline; when, on the one hand, no obligation or morality is involved and a person must look at things directly, considering things from a purely utilitarian point of view, and, on the other hand, he must ask himself whether it would be better to act from the point of view of his own self-esteem, but not his own interests, or take up the standpoint of his own class, although it would mean the end of him as an individual. If I am told that it is necessary, on each occasion, to act according to certain rules of behaviour, then I demand that these rules of behaviour prove themselves.

Our morality cannot be intuitive, categorically prescriptive; it must show that it is right. But is it possible to live without a code of morals? Standards of behaviour are necessary, which we must develop and transform into norms of upbringing.

If this is so, however, we are approaching very close to Chernyshevsky, because, if we consider that man must reason out and choose for himself rules for his behaviour, then obviously he must choose the best rules from a rational point of view. Each person, as an egoist, has the right and the possibility to choose that which is best for him; we go up to him and say: I shall explain to you how you are to behave, and I shall show that this is the best way for you to behave. Once we have accepted this, we shall be very close to Chernyshevsky.

Why ought Chernyshevsky be studied?

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How is it that Chernyshevsky's theory of egoism, which is, at first sight, so naive, and which Plekhanov, it seemed, was easily able to demolish with his penetrating criticism, how is it that this theory has once again come up?

It is because the period in which we are living, the obligations which are placed upon us and the behaviour which this period dictates to us, are like those which Chernyshevsky imagined to be existing in his lifetime.

Chernyshevsky imagined that he was a great teacher of life, that he would rally around himself a party, a party of the intelligentsia, which would reorganise life and create a new, rational morality; he imagined that he would be able to prove that this was indeed a rational morality, and that any other form of morality was invalid. But his ideas about the period in which he lived and the role he was to fulfil were illusory. We, however, are in a position to do this. Only recently we were saying that we would not write a code of morality and behaviour, but now it is obvious that we cannot manage without it. Young people are demanding it. We should picture the genuine proletarian to ourselves: what sort of a person is he, and how does he behave in different circumstances? What do we mean by good and evil? We cannot rely on instinct prompting us. We are the people who are consciously educating new generations and attempting to shed the light of reason on every problem — can we really rely upon instinct and say, “Don't worry, somehow everything will turn out all right”? No, we cannot say that a young citizen can live without standards of behaviour. Lenin tells us plainly that there will be such a code of morals and its fundamental principle will, without a doubt, be that in this transitional period, a period of struggle, each person must subordinate his behaviour to the interests of his entire class. From this arise very many points which have yet to be developed.

I do not mean that Plekhanov, if he were to think about the moral tasks which face us today, would not say what Vladimir Ilyich said, or what I am saying now. But there is the feeling, when he approaches Chernyshevsky, that he departs somewhat from this position; he seems to over-emphasise the fact that everything arises naturally, that actions are not in fact actions, but processes, the result of definite causes. Why is this so? It is because Plekhanov represents the stage in the development of the proletariat and of proletarian ideology when it was necessary to destroy the subjectivism and the utopianism of Mikhailovsky. This had to be destroyed mercilessly; it had to be shown that, until the groundwork was laid, until the masses

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can untie the knots of history. Go to the proletariat, and help it develop and consciously organise itself, help it to act in conjunction with the forces of history. Only then, only when your own wishes coincide with the laws of social development, will you be victorious.

Everything rational is real, and everything real is rational. Does this mean that what is rational must inevitably become real? But how long will this take? When will today's irrationality mature into tomorrow's rationality? Everything real is rational. But this means that there is an irrational element in present-day reality: something which in fact belongs to yesterday and which is dying away. You must therefore take up the standpoint of tomorrow's rationality, and help its development; only by acting in unison with Nature and by aiding the course of history will you be able to achieve anything.

While Mikhailovsky was forming his toothless subjectivism — his theory that one can change the course of history at will — Plekhanov was the mighty harbinger of real truth, the teacher of the wisdom of life. Everything he says is true, but does it represent the whole truth? No; it is perhaps two-thirds of the truth — nine-tenths even — but not the whole truth.

It is necessary to co-operate with reality. When we were underground, the words “unleash the revolution” seemed to the Mensheviks to be improbable and terribly daring. Why? Revolution is an elemental phenomenon which happens quite naturally like the phases of the moon. Can one speed up the moon's phases? Of course not. Our mind and will can influence social phenomena only to a certain extent, can lend a helping hand, as it were. The romantic revolutionaries of the strictly Narodnik type found this vexing; they considered themselves a unique force which was leaving its imprint on the epoch. What's an imprint got to do with it? people said to them. All you need to do is explain why this and that happened, and lend a helping hand so old woman history does not tarry, but goes on her way. When we were underground, what sort of help to history was it, for example, when we taught the workers of the Obukhov Factory with the aid of the pamphlet *Who Lives From What?* Compare that with what October had to offer! Historical events of tremendous world-wide significance took place — everything was done consciously and in an organised fashion. The time came so swiftly moving, so revolutionary, so charged with energy, with such a huge accumulation of forces, which only needed organising to make them prevail. We Bolsheviks knew, while still underground, that this time would come.

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Let me once again remind you of Engels's great phrase about the leap from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom. What did Engels mean by this? Once human will is organised, it assumes a tremendous power over the fate of mankind. Marx too stressed the point more than once that man believes in gods, etc., because of his confused and chaotic social relationships; but as soon as society has been organised, man will rise above social laws and his whole destiny will be subordinate to reason, will advance according to reason.

We are already at the turning-point. We already have the beginnings of a socialist society and the dictatorship of a politically conscious class — the proletariat; in ourselves we bear the consciousness of the class which is the maker of human destiny. This means that consciousness, organised consciousness, is acquiring for us greater and greater power. This power is not limitless — it is perhaps very limited: phenomena must first be thoroughly analysed before they can be influenced; they must be correctly evaluated so that there should be no mistakes, but it is nonetheless possible to influence and alter them. Human morals, the rules of behaviour, can be included here. One can no longer say, like Plekhanov, that morals depend on upbringing — as you have been brought up, so you will behave. And yet, according to Plekhanov, that is through the influence of our society, we must inculcate these rules in people. But since it is we now who are educating, since all schools, all the press, all the economy and all educative forces are in our hands, we have to ask ourselves how, in what spirit we shall educate, what do we consider to be genuinely good, and how shall we manage, by conscious and careful selection, to transform this element of good into instinct? We must define the content of education and the method by which we want to instil social, proletarian morality into a child, develop his thoughts, make him consider different motives of conduct and choose that which is of greatest social benefit.

This explains why we are nine-tenths in agreement with Plekhanov; but over his head we stretch out our hands to this utopian socialist who ascribed such huge significance to the power of the human reason and will. Marxism has cut these factors extremely short, and has shown that they are themselves subject to objective laws; at the same time it has shown that, as the proletariat becomes more organised, as it takes the power into its own hands, so will the sphere of influence of will and reason widen more and more — and not as the utopians imagined it, but in reality.

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of Chernyshevsky is no longer valid. For this reason, I cannot agree with Comrade Steklov when he says that Chernyshevsky was not a utopian; but neither do I agree with Plekhanov who says that, since Chernyshevsky was a utopian, his entire system of ethics and aesthetics was completely useless, that he approached these problems the way he did precisely because he was a utopian, and that none of his teachings can be put to use. Chernyshevsky's ideas are important to the person who is certain of victory, important to us because we are building socialism, and building it consciously, because we have real power, even if limited, over events.

This is what can be said about Chernyshevsky's ethics and aesthetics, if judged from a contemporary standpoint and in the light of the new conditions. Chernyshevsky himself as a person and everything that he left behind represent the most tremendous and valuable of heritages.

When I met Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya the other day, she asked me what I was doing at the moment. I mentioned that, among other things, I was preparing a lecture on Chernyshevsky at the Communist Academy. Nadezhda Konstantinovna said to me:

There was hardly anyone Vladimir Ilyich loved so much as Chernyshevsky. He felt an intimate affinity with him and had an extraordinarily deep respect for him.

And then after a moment's thought, she said:

I think there was a great deal in common between Chernyshevsky and Vladimir Ilyich.

I do not, in fact, know whether there was much in common — there were differences, as well as common points — but I do know that, in the evaluation of human calibre, of beauty and the shape of character, these two people did indeed stand close to each other. Lenin's heritage and wisdom represent for us and for untold ages to come a rich treasure-house for study. Chernyshevsky, too, has left much behind, which must be recognised, not merely as a wonderful memorial to a definite era, but also as something which ought to be studied.

With this lecture I wished to contribute to precisely such an evaluation of Chernyshevsky.

1. Roderic Day, 2022. "Why Read Chernyshevsky?" [\[web\]](#) ↩

2. N. G. Chernyshevsky, "The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality" (1855). [\[web\]](#) ↩
3. N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Literaturnoye Naslediye* [*Literary Heritage*], Vol. I, Gosizdat, 1928, pp. 556-57. ↩
4. N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Goslitizdat, Moscow, 1949, pp. 9-10. ↩
5. The *raznochintsy* (literally, men of various social estates) were educated members of Russian society drawn from the small townsfolk, the clergy, the merchant classes and the peasantry, as distinct from those drawn from the nobility. — *Ed.* ↩
6. *Chernyshevsky's Correspondence with Nekrasov, Dobrolyubov and A. S. Zelyony*, Moskovsky Rabochy, Moscow-Leningrad, 1925, p. 28. ↩
7. *Chernyshevsky's Correspondence*, p. 35. ↩
8. *Ibid.*, p. 42. ↩
9. *Chernyshevsky's Correspondence*, p. 13. ↩
10. V. E. Cheshikhin-Vetrinsky, *N. G. Chernyshevsky, 1828-1889*, Kolos, Petrograd, 1923, p. 103. ↩
11. *Ibid.* ↩
12. *Ibid.* ↩
13. *Chernyshevsky's Correspondence*, p. 59. ↩
14. *Contemporary* (Russ.). — Tr. ↩
15. K. N. Berkova, *N. G. Chernyshevsky*, Moskovsky Rabochy, 1925, p. 114. ↩
16. N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 14. ↩
17. N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 42. ↩↩
18. *Ibid.* p. 86. ↩

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19. G. V. Plekhanov, *Works*, Vol. VI, Gosizdat, 1925, p. 251. ↩
20. *Narodniks*: Followers of a petty-bourgeois trend, Narodism, in the Russian revolutionary movement, which arose in the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century. — *Ed.* ↩
21. In his first book on Chernyshevsky, Comrade Steklov tried to show that Chernyshevsky was not a utopian, but a thinker whose philosophy almost entirely anticipated Marxism. Plekhanov was right in refuting this point of view and in proving that Chernyshevsky was indeed a utopian. In *Pod znamenem marksizma (Under the Banner of Marxism)*, No. 1, 1928, there is a new article by Steklov: “Was Chernyshevsky a Utopian?” I have not yet read it, but I can see from the title that Comrade Steklov is again trying to prove his former line of thought. I think this will be of no avail. ↩
22. G. V. Plekhanov, *Works*, Vol. V, 1924, p. 215. ↩
23. *Ibid.*, p. 216. ↩
24. G. V. Plekhanov, *Works*, Vol. V, pp. 218-19. ↩
25. N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 92. ↩

1. Roderic Day, 2022. “Why Read Chernyshevsky?” [web] ↩